

## **HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

Fiscal Year 2005

The Human Rights Commission (HRC or Commission) continues to be the advocate for the assurance of individual and organizational human rights. Mediation and intervention are undertaken by the Director. The charge of the Commission is the education of the Amherst Community to be sensitive to the norms of respect, dignity, and civil rights of all its citizens, in keeping with its mission to promote equal justice for all the citizens of Amherst.

During FY 05, the Commission operated with its full, 9-member complement. Monthly meetings were held on the third Thursday of each month and we joyfully succeeded in achieving a quorum 98% of the time.

The Commission has worked toward enlisting community-based groups and individuals in educational programs to increase awareness of human rights issues in the Town of Amherst.

We felt that by collaborating with organizations and initiatives involved in similar issues relating to advocacy, we could significantly increase our effectiveness. The following were among the issues we addressed:

### **COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS:**

- our continued interest in support of affordable housing in Amherst
- advocacy for non-citizen eligibility for participation on boards/committees
- HRC co-sponsorship of a Solstice concert at ARHS
- HRC/Study Circle support regarding issues of racial disproportionality of discipline in the High School
- HRC co-sponsorship of the showing of the film “The War on Civil Liberties” at the Jones Library
- member involvement in the initiative to “Dismantle Racism in the Valley”
- HRC participation in a flyer campaign urging people of color to become involved in voter participation and running for Town Meeting seats
- ‘Darfur Action Day’ involvement to address and focus on the occurring genocide (Art exhibit)
- Poverty March presentation of the International Declaration of Human Rights
- AFSC/HRC “Eyes Wide Open” support of the “Boots” exhibit memorializing Iraqis and Americans

- HRC participation in the Earth Day Celebration on the Town Common
- Support of “First Day” activity on the eve of school opening in September
- Two high school Commissioners organized and participated in a voter registration drive, registering eighteen-year-old students and reaching out to Amherst residents living in housing complexes in South Amherst.

For the third year, the Select Board declared December 10<sup>th</sup> as “Human Rights Day.” The HRC organized a Candle Light Vigil, with Commissioner Joseph Wronka leading the reading of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Banner, “Human Rights for Every Person Everywhere” was displayed on the Town Common for a week leading up to the celebration.

HRC attended the MLK Breakfast in support of Commissioner Emily Owens receiving the MLK award.

The Commission recognized the involvement of Commissioners Emily Owens and Rachel Mahta with a certificate of appreciation from the Town Manager and the Select Board for serving two years on the Amherst Human Rights Commission. The Commission and the Director wishes to congratulate Emily and Rachel for a job well done and much success in their endeavors as they enter Harvard University and Tufts University, respectively.

### **ISSUES OF CONCERN:**

The Commission monitored UMass international graduate students’ efforts to receive fair treatment as citizens of the community.

The Commission followed up on a complaint by the ALANA group of the student body.

No Place for Hate, Amherst, continuation: The Commission recognized 17 “Young Hero/ines” at the Annual Community Gathering at the Mill River recreation area. The assembled members of the community listened to the accomplishments of their nominees, who received certificates and book awards.

HRC co-sponsored, with the Amherst Schools, an event honoring the first anniversary of same-sex marriages in Massachusetts. Fifty same-sex couples received a bound copy of the official document, *Goodrich v Dept. of Public Health* by Chief Justice Margaret Mitchell and Associate Justice, John Greaney, in commemoration of the historic state event.

Three HRC members were appointed to the Police Stops Committee concerned with potential racial bias issues.

The Commission submitted a warrant article to the Annual Town Meeting to ask the Town to ask the Town to adopt a “Declaration of Human Rights Principles and Conventions”. The article was adopted.

Black History Month was discussed at length, aimed at promoting African-American history and local citizen accomplishments. No defined activity resulted, but the issue remains on the agenda of the subcommittee for discussion.

Bullying in the schools was a concern registered with the Study Circles and the NAACP. A presentation was made to the Commission by Ms. Fiona Cooper as a resource person familiar with the issue. The video “Don’t Laugh at Me” was cited as important for the HRC to review.

A presentation on a similar subject, “Workplace Psychological Harassment,” was made to the Commission, which helped inform them to recognize the debilitating effects on employees.

The Chair was one of the speakers, along with Mr. Paul Hyry and Ms. Gia Bernini, at the Summer Institute for Training and Development for the study of the United States Panel on Racism in America. Participants were 30 visiting international graduate students, principally from European countries. The Chair also participated in the Five College Program “Learning in Retirement,” presenting six events on issues of slavery and its legacy.

Grace House neighborhood issues were discussed at length. HRC involvement could not be considered because of the delicate and political nature of the controversy.

Hope Church land issues were also discussed. Neither individual members nor the Commission were in a position to take a side if we were to be a neutral body for either side to appeal to if necessary.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS DIRECTOR**

The Director has been exceptionally busy this year, responding to over 40 requests/complaints from citizens and Town employees. Only one of the issues resulted in a formal investigation, which was resolved through mediation. There was an average of 20-25 calls per week regarding alleged civil rights violations, inquiries of a general nature, consultations, and other administrative issues. Furthermore, the Director organized a series of in-service training sessions on sexual harassment prevention for department heads and staff.

The Director continues to chair the “Becoming a Multicultural Town Committee,” whose charge is to look into the diversity of Town boards and committees. Moreover, the Director has served as consultant on issues of Affirmative Action and has been involved in the hiring process for several departments, and also attends the meetings of the Police Stops Committee.

The Director attended and participated in training for Black leaders and community development, and met with community members and the League of Women Voters to discuss the role of the Commission.

The Director participated in a School Committee Meeting to discuss the possible hiring of a School Resource Officer, and participated in the “March to Abolish Poverty,” and attended all HRC meetings.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the Commissioners, for all of their support, and for the many hours they have contributed to make this Commission move forward in

fulfilling its goals and mission to assure that all citizens are afforded equal protection under the law.

The Commission appreciates all the support it receives from Town officials.

### **SUMMARY**

The Amherst community should be aware that meetings are open. We encourage your attendance to help us become aware of issues that you are interested in or were you believe we can be effective instruments to effect change in behavior in an individual. We are here to protect human dignity and educate where necessary.

*Respectfully submitted for the Commission  
Reynolds Winslow, Chair  
Eunice Torres, Director*